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Committee on the Rights of the Child
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Summary record of the 2137th meeting
Held at the Palais Wilson, Geneva, on Thursday, 15 September 2016, at 3 p.m.

Chair: Mr. Mezmur

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The meeting was called to order at 3.05 p.m.

Consideration of reports of States parties

Combined third to fifth periodic reports of Sierra Leone (continued) (CRC/C/SLE/3-5; CRC/C/SLE/Q/3-5 and Add.1)

1. *At the invitation of the Chair, the delegation of Sierra Leone took places at the Committee table.*

2. **Mr. Kotrane**, turning to the issue of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, said that he welcomed the adoption, by the State party, of the Sexual Offences Act (2012). It was unfortunate that the Committee had not been provided with a copy of that text. Information on domestic legislation prohibiting the sale of children would be welcome. He asked whether measures had been taken to implement the recommendations of the Committee relating to the need to specifically criminalize the improper actions of intermediaries in cases of intercountry adoption, to the strengthening of efforts to combat illegal adoption and to extraterritorial jurisdiction and extradition contained in paragraphs 31 to 36 of its 2010 concluding observations. The State party did not appear to recognize that it had jurisdiction over offences committed abroad by Sierra Leonean nationals or by persons habitually resident in Sierra Leone, or against Sierra Leonean nationals.

3. As to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, he asked for an update on the plans to review the Child Rights Act in order to criminalize the use of children in hostilities, as referred to in paragraph 107 of the State party's replies to the list of issues.

4. **Ms. Khazova** asked, in the light of the lifting of the moratorium on intercountry adoption by the State party, what guarantees were currently in place to ensure that the adoption process was not used as a cover for the sale of and trafficking in children. She also asked whether the State party intended to become party to the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Cooperation in respect of Intercountry Adoption in the near future, whether it had any plans to develop and promote a system for domestic adoption and to assist adoptive parents and whether the National Alternative Care Policy or the Government's child rights strategy provided for domestic adoptions.

5. **Ms. Aldoseri** said that only 10 per cent of children in the State party had access to early childhood education. She asked whether any plans had been drawn up to improve that situation and, if so, whether a corresponding specific timeframe had been set, whether the Government intended to take over responsibility from the private sector in that regard, whether there were any plans to tackle the low rate of school attendance among girls through awareness-raising campaigns promoting school enrolment at the grassroots level and whether the Government would consider lifting the ban on pregnant students attending school as a part of efforts to encourage girls to remain in education.

6. **Ms. Blyden** (Sierra Leone), turning to the issue of vulnerable children from poor families, said that legislation on social safety nets had been put in place, under which the National Social Security and Insurance Trust had been set up to provide funds for the care of individuals and families living in extreme poverty. The State party had been operating a system of cash transfers and psychosocial and economic support for such families for a number of years. In the wake of the Ebola crisis, efforts in that regard had been increased and a further 59,000 poor families had been identified. The World Bank and the National Commission for Social Action had launched a joint project providing cash transfers and livelihood support to families living in poverty.

7. Turning to a question relating to a home for orphaned adolescent girls located in Bombali District, the institution in question had been set up by a Swiss national in Kamakwie, Bombali District, and would be the subject of an official investigation in the near future, the results of which would be communicated to the Committee.

8. Although no specific data on the number of infants currently being held in detention with their mothers were available, work was ongoing to set up a database that would contain such information. There was only one prison facility that met the requirements set out in the Child Rights Act relating to the detention of mothers with their infant children. Mafanta prison was currently being upgraded.

9. No specific data were currently available on children with disabilities. However, the national census had been overhauled and currently covered issues such as the percentage of children with disabilities living in the State party and the categories of disability concerned, in order to facilitate planning in that regard. The final results of the census would be made available to the Committee as soon as they were available.

10. There had been a spate of cases of teachers giving students the answers to exam questions in return for cash or sexual favours. A nationwide system had been put in place to tackle that issue and severe sanctions were imposed upon any teacher involved in an inappropriate relationship with a student under the age of 18 years. In 2015, the Government had run a major campaign highlighting the problem of corruption in the education sector and the corresponding penalties.

11. The Child Rights Act contained provisions on child labour. It was a criminal offence to take a child out of school and place him or her in any type of labour. Talks would be held at the interministerial level on how best to enforce and strengthen the Act and the penalties in that regard.

12. No specific data on the number of children in residential or foster care, or placed with relatives, were currently available. However, with the support of the African Development Bank (ADB) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 600 social workers would be recruited to carry out data collection on issues such as fostering in the field for a period of four months, possibly to be extended for a further eight months. A database had already been put in place in that regard.

13. The National Alternative Care Policy for Children was currently being implemented only on an ad hoc basis. However, the distribution by the Government of food, clothes, educational materials and cooking utensils to children placed with foster families or reunited with their biological parents had led to a culture of dependency. As the policy had not yet been fully implemented on a formal basis, no results were available for the time being. The State party currently employed only 49 social workers nationwide, making it extremely difficult to provide follow-up relating to all children placed in alternative forms of care and to carry out home visits and investigations in that regard. The Trust Fund for Child Welfare had not yet been set up; however, action would be taken in that regard as soon as possible.

14. **Ms. Ayoubi Idrissi** (Country Rapporteur) asked whether an official body responsible for statistics relating to children had been set up independently of the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs and whether measures had been taken to improve the quality of teaching and access to education in rural areas.

15. **Ms. Sandberg** asked whether the 600 social workers who would be recruited in the near future would provide support to families and children, in addition to collecting data.

16. **Ms. Aho Assouma** asked whether social workers would intervene in prisons to assist mothers detained with their infants and whether any services were currently available

for those detainees. She asked how the national authorities assisted children in street situations and child labourers.

17. **Ms. Winter** (Country Rapporteur) said that she would appreciate a comment on whether the State party had established a code of conduct for teachers that would provide them with training and would address the issue of corruption in schools. She asked whether the Government had made efforts to educate parents on the importance of sending their children to school. Child labour was a problem not only among street children but also among children who lived with their families. Children were sometimes forced by their parents to work before the start of the school day, which inevitably affected their performance at school.

18. **Ms. Blyden** (Sierra Leone) said that Statistics Sierra Leone (SSL) functioned as an efficient national data-collection institute. SSL was legally mandated to conduct national censuses and to collect data on other relevant national indicators including children's issues. There was at least one SSL staff member working in every government ministry. Although the institute encountered technological challenges, such as the maintenance of databases, it operated very efficiently on the whole.

19. Social workers in Sierra Leone were not merely data collectors. They were currently being deployed as part of the Government's post-Ebola recovery operation and were also responsible for monitoring the welfare of children and mothers. All social workers were required to have minimum qualifications from a recognized university. Despite recent budgetary constraints, the Government had agreed to permanently employ a further 200 social workers, thanks to advocacy efforts by the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs (MSWGCA). It was the Ministry's belief that, had more social workers been available during the Ebola epidemic, faster intervention would have been possible and the crisis would not have been so grave. On account of the economic downturn, a high proportion of retiring social workers had not been replaced over the past 30 years, with the effect of significantly reducing the number of active social workers. The Ministry was seeking to educate people on the importance of social workers who provided a direct link to communities, intervened when they were capable of doing so, and brought issues to the attention of higher authorities when necessary.

20. Social workers also carried out work in prisons and were the only persons, apart from judiciary staff, who were able to conduct unannounced prison inspections. In the event of a woman with a child being remanded in custody, MSWGCA was immediately informed of the situation and staff members were assigned to ensure that the child would be taken into interim care.

21. **Ms.** Sarian **Kamara** (Sierra Leone) said that the Code of Conduct for Teachers and Other Educational Personnel had been developed and teachers had been trained in that regard. The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology had established standards with which all schools were required to comply in order to be registered as an educational institution. Head teachers were also required to attain a certain level of qualification, which varied depending on whether the head teacher presided over a primary or secondary school. Efforts had been made to reduce overcrowding in schools. For instance, additional classrooms had been built in many schools, decreasing the number of children per class to roughly 30.

22. In order to address the issue of corruption, teacher verification exercises were being conducted, whereby teachers were required to bring in their teaching certificates to school. Furthermore, instead of the salaries of teachers being paid into a single school account, as had previously been the case, teachers were obliged to open an individual account into which their salary would be paid as a way of tackling misappropriation of funds. Similarly, standards had been put into place to ensure that funds allocated by the Government to

schools could be paid only into the relevant school account and never into the private account of an individual.

23. The current academic year would mark the introduction of a school feeding programme aimed at improving concentration levels among children. In addition, efforts had been made to prevent a resurgence of Ebola by improving school water and sanitation facilities. Teachers had also received training in that regard.

24. **Ms.** Joyce **Kamara** (Sierra Leone) said that there were three different categories of street children: those who stayed in the street during the day but returned to their family home at night, those who were sent by families to work in the streets for a given period of time after which they returned home, and those who were permanently homeless. Street children who became involved in criminal activity were monitored by probation officers and were sometimes sent to a remand home or approved school.

25. Programmes were being implemented to reunify street children with their families. As part of such programmes, social workers identified street children and placed them in interim care. Such children were provided with food, counselling and medical treatment where necessary. Efforts would be made to track down the families of street children and to reunify the child with his or her family. Follow-up visits were also conducted to verify that the reunification had been successful. The National Commission for Children was currently conducting a survey on female street children who had been sexually abused and had consequently fallen pregnant. The results of the survey would be used to provide better support services for such victims.

26. **Mr. Gastaud** said that he would like to know whether statistics were available on the total number of street children in Sierra Leone. He asked what happened to children for whom the family reunification had not been successful, whether such children were taken into care and, if they did not like the care home, what the next course of action would be for them. He sought clarification as to whether inspectors had been employed to ensure compliance with the laws prohibiting child labour, and whether any persons had been prosecuted or convicted as a result of non-compliance.

27. **Ms. Blyden** (Sierra Leone) said that there had indeed been cases of trials and convictions of individuals who had not complied with the anti-child labour laws. The Government was striving to raise awareness of the importance of children's education and the need to keep children off the streets, and was prepared to strengthen existing laws in that regard.

28. **Ms.** Joyce **Kamara** (Sierra Leone) said that, in the event of the failure of family reunification, street children would be placed in a foster family. Assessments would be carried out to ensure that the foster family was capable of looking after the child in question and follow-up visits would also be conducted. In Sierra Leone, children from rural areas were often duped into moving to the city, where they were told they would receive an education. In reality, such children were often exploited for economic gain. The practice was punishable under the Anti-Human Trafficking Act (2005) but such cases were rarely reported and, consequently, were seldom taken to court.

29. **Ms. Blyden** (Sierra Leone) said that the following circumstances could result in a child being placed in interim care: if the child had been abandoned by his or her parents, if the child had been orphaned and the close relatives of the child were not prepared to look after him or her, if the child was thought to have suffered sexual or gender-based violence in the family home, in cases of both maternity and paternity disputes over the child, or in particularly traumatic divorce proceedings.

30. Regarding juvenile justice, remand homes were used to accommodate children aged between 14 and 17 years who were facing trial. Approved schools functioned as a means of ensuring that children serving prison sentences were able to continue their education.

31. **Ms. Ayoubi Idrissi** said that she wished to know how the authorities of the State party, with its shortage of social workers, found out about specific cases of violence against children. In addition, she asked why they considered it necessary to remove children from their homes pending the resolution of paternity disputes.

32. **Ms. Winter** said that she would welcome clarification as to whether children aged under 14 years, who could not be held criminally liable for an offence under law, were placed in remand homes.

33. **Ms. Sandberg** said that she would like to know whether the best interest of the child was the most important consideration when deciding whether a child should be placed into care. It seemed that some of the circumstances listed by Ms. Blyden did not necessarily warrant a child being taken into care.

34. **Ms. Blyden** (Sierra Leone) said that disputes between divorcing parents were sometimes so violent that the authorities had no choice but to remove any children from their care. Schoolteachers often acted as auxiliary social workers, reporting incidents of suspected child abuse. In addition, the Family Support Units of the Sierra Leone Police, which were of considerable assistance to officials from the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs, had been reinforced just before the outbreak of the Ebola epidemic and would be further reinforced as the post-Ebola economic crisis wound down. Ministry officials did not wait for court orders to remove a child from an abusive environment. Action was taken immediately. Parents, however, could turn to the courts to contest any such removals.

35. **Ms.** Sarian **Kamara** (Sierra Leone) said that the National Referral Protocol had provided for the comprehensive treatment of victims and survivors of gender-based violence, who were entitled to free treatment in all public facilities. The Rainbow Centres, located at Princess Christian Maternity Hospital in Freetown and in the districts of Kono and Kailahun in the eastern part of the country, also provided care to such persons. One major stumbling block to ensuring that victims of such crimes as rape had full access to the services they were entitled to was that, by law, only a medical doctor could produce and sign the reports attesting to the harm that had been done to them. Efforts were therefore being made to ensure that other trained health-care personnel, such as midwives and community health workers, could produce those reports.

36. More training on how to respond to gender-based violence was needed, as was assistance in building the capacity of the country's medical personnel to carry out forensic examinations. The Ministry investigated reports that victims of such violence were asked to pay for their care and sometimes took punitive action in response.

37. Birth registration was a right in Sierra Leone. No parent should be asked to pay for it. Under the National Civil Registration Act, 2016, birth registration would be made compulsory, and a new agency had been set up to ensure that registration procedures were harmonized. The agency would be responsible for running an outreach campaign designed to contact parents who had not previously registered their children's birth. Mass registration efforts had continued even during the Ebola outbreak, and as a rule birth certificates were delivered immediately.

The meeting was suspended at 11.30 a.m. and resumed at noon.

38. **Ms. Ayoubi Idrissi** asked whether the law mandating the provision of free health care to victims of sexual violence was properly enforced.

39. **Ms. Blyden** (Sierra Leone) acknowledged that such victims were sometimes asked to pay for their care, in part because doctors, wary of being summoned to testify in court, preferred to treat them as they might any other patient. Amending the provision stating that cases of gender-based violence could not be successfully prosecuted without testimony from a doctor would facilitate matters greatly. Paramedical personnel were sufficiently trained to provide such testimony. Nonetheless, considerable efforts were made, particularly in larger cities, to ensure that sexual and gender-based crimes were prosecuted. She had been considering creating a directorate whose mission would be to work to change attitudes to gender-based violence in rural areas. The Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs organized meetings throughout the country to inform the population about the Child Rights Act and the laws relating to sexual or domestic violence, customary marriage and civil registration. Jingles, targeting village children, were used to encourage school attendance.

40. Child Welfare Committees, which had been set up throughout the country before the Ebola outbreak, had been effective. As the ban on public gatherings had been lifted, officials from the Ministry were focusing on re-establishing the Committees.

41. It was not just the private sector that was involved in providing early childhood services. In fact, only one month earlier, the Government, with the support of the United Nations Children's Fund, had launched an early childhood development strategy involving partnerships with a wide range of stakeholders. In addition, the Government funded the School Feeding Programme and provided schoolbooks and other instructional material.

42. Great progress had been made towards gender parity in the schools. At the primary level, girls were very nearly as likely to be enrolled as boys, and girls interested in pursuing fields of study traditionally dominated by men, such as engineering, were entitled to free education through the university level. More needed to be done, however, to encourage girls to pursue higher education. The Ebola outbreak had not helped in that regard, as it had contributed to a wave of teenage pregnancies.

43. Courses in sexual and reproductive health emphasized sexual abstinence for girls and the prevention of HIV/AIDS. The Learning Centres had been set up to ensure that pregnant girls could continue their schooling without having to endure the humiliation of attending school while visibly pregnant. They were encouraged to resume their schooling in mainstream schools after giving birth. The report of the country's Human Rights Commission, a fully independent body, was unfairly critical of the approach the Government had taken to ensuring that pregnant girls could exercise their right to education.

44. Since the reopening of the schools in 2015, primary education had been free for both boys and girls. Since early 2016, however, the parents of boys above the junior secondary level had been asked to make contributions towards covering the cost of their education. Nearly 200 schools had been built in the past three years.

45. A steering committee, made up of representatives of employers' and workers' organizations, child protection agencies and key ministries, had been established to coordinate efforts to deal with child labour. It was currently working to ensure the completion of the latest Draft National Action Plan for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour.

46. **Ms. Aldoseri** asked whether the State party had implemented the strategy for early childhood development mentioned by Ms. Blyden. She also asked what the time frame for the strategy was and how it was funded.

47. **Ms. Aho Assouma** asked why the Ebola crisis had led to an increase in the teenage pregnancy rate and why pregnant girls were sent to specialized centres rather than being allowed to remain in mainstream schools. That practice risked revictimizing them.

48. **Ms. Blyden** (Sierra Leone) said that the early childhood development plan had been fully implemented and would be reviewed after five years. Pregnant girls were not forced to attend the learning centres; they could study at home if they wished. The centres prevented them from being bullied by their peers and further protected their mental health by providing counselling before and after the birth. Once they had received post-birth counselling, they could return to mainstream schooling. Detained women could live with their babies in prison, or their babies could be brought into the prison by relatives to be breastfed.

49. **Ms.** Sarian **Kamara** (Sierra Leone) said that interventions to promote breastfeeding had been incorporated into strategies that addressed malnutrition, a major cause of child death. Sierra Leone was part of the Scaling Up Nutrition movement, and the country's nutrition strategy promoted exclusive breastfeeding in the first six months of life and continued breastfeeding for children up to 2 years of age. Several mother and child weeks were organized each year; training materials and guidelines on breastfeeding had been developed, and communities were being engaged, partly through the more than 5,000 support groups for mothers run by community health workers. Key stakeholders, such as traditional and religious leaders, also helped to raise awareness of the importance of exclusive breastfeeding. Those interventions had succeeded in raising the breastfeeding rate for babies under 6 months to almost 60 per cent. According to the World Health Organization's guidelines, it was acceptable for Ebola survivors to breastfeed because there was no evidence to suggest that the virus was present in breast milk.

50. Although mental health was one of the Government's priorities and had been integrated into primary health care, there was a severe lack of trained staff in the country, with just two qualified doctors and two who were undergoing training; mental health was not a popular specialism for new doctors. However, a psychiatrist had been recruited from abroad thanks to a World Bank project, and, with support from various partners, a mental health clinic had been opened, which was managed by four nurses who had received high-level training in child and adolescent mental health. Furthermore, the Kissy Mental Hospital had 250 beds, although it required refurbishment. Children did not share wards with adults. A referral pathway had been developed that used algorithms to refer patients to hospital if needed.

51. Drug and alcohol abuse was a significant problem, particularly among the young. The National Drugs Act had recently been enacted and the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency established, although it was not fully operational because of a lack of funding. A national awareness-raising campaign targeted young people, and staff in different sectors were being trained to spot the signs of substance abuse. A regulatory body was working to prevent the illegal sale of prescription drugs. However, work was needed to remove drug dealers from the streets.

52. Although awareness of malaria prevention and control was high, less than half of households, and just over half of pregnant women, used mosquito nets. A review of existing educational materials was planned, along with an analysis of the barriers to the use of nets, which would allow new strategies to be developed. Additionally, community health workers would be trained in awareness-raising, and key stakeholders, such as religious leaders and men, would be involved in encouraging pregnant women to use nets. A recent meeting of the agencies involved in combating malaria had mapped the work of all partners so as to avoid the duplication of efforts. A community engagement strategy was also under development.

53. Young people had access to free condoms through a sexual and reproductive health programme and a secretariat dealing with teenage pregnancy. They could also access them at health-care facilities, which provided information on sexual and reproductive health and rights and were being made more welcoming to young people. National standards were

being developed that would define the package of services to be provided to young people; those services would include sexual and reproductive health. Lastly, a multisectoral approach for young people was being devised.

54. **Ms. Blyden** (Sierra Leone) said that Sierra Leone had enacted extremely strict laws to regulate international adoptions, which were not normally permitted except by relatives. Adoptions could not be conducted through agencies, and any foreigner wishing to adopt a child must travel to the country on several occasions to spend time with him or her under the supervision of social workers. They must also agree to submit an annual report from their country's social services.

55. **Ms. Ayoubi Idrissi**, thanking the delegation for its engagement in the dialogue, said that the Committee noted the State party's commitment to the rights of the child and looked forward to receiving information regarding female genital mutilation, sexual and gender-based violence, free and universal birth registration and education. She reiterated the Committee's view that pregnant girls whose pregnancies were the result of statutory rape should not be prevented from attending school. She looked forward to receiving positive news about the implementation of an effective data-collection system and the opportunities and care provided for children with disabilities.

56. **Ms. Stevens** (Sierra Leone) said that Sierra Leone had championed many Human Rights Council resolutions relating to children, demonstrating that its commitment to the rights of the child transcended its borders.

57. **Ms. Blyden** (Sierra Leone) said that the State party was unequivocally opposed to female genital mutilation. A strategy to combat it was being developed, and female practitioners were being used to spread the message. While she noted the Committee's concerns regarding sexual and gender-based violence and access to education, it was important to remember that the Government's practice of placing pregnant girls in special learning centres was aimed at protecting their social and mental well-being. The dialogue with the Committee had allowed for reflection and learning, and the State party would continue to engage with the Committee under the guidance of the President.

58. **The Chair** said that the Committee would welcome written information on the issues that had not been discussed during the dialogue. He hoped that the concluding observations would receive close attention and that, with the help of the Committee, the State party would be empowered to realize the rights of the child in Sierra Leone.

The meeting rose at 1 p.m.